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John Arquilla

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It isn't easy being great. Just look at ancient Rome, the most successful empire the world has ever seen, thanks to its superb military.

But the idea of an orderly Pax Romana is an historical fiction. For at the height of its power, Rome still engaged in almost constant warfare. Even the peace-loving philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius spent most of his time fighting against tribal raiders and outbreaks of terror on the frontiers. His "Meditations" were almost all written in camp.

Sound a bit like our own situation?

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States has been the world's sole superpower, a military colossus whose capabilities far outmatch those of any other nation. Yet our dominant sense is one of siege rather than celebration, as a seemingly endless stream of enemies has emerged to imperil American security and prosperity.

Perceived threats haven't come just from terrorists. Even during the decade before Sept. 11, 2001, what might be called our "national security holiday," we saw reason to fight in Iraq and Somalia, occupied Haiti, and sought to bomb the Serbs into submission on two separate occasions.

The attacks on America in 2001 simply drove the point home that a new era of perpetual warfare was now underway. So, like the ancient Romans before us, we feel compelled to man the ramparts all over our vast sphere of influence in an effort to keep the barbarians outside the gates.

Today, our latter-day legions fight terrorists across a broad swath of the Muslim world, from remote sites in the Sahara to the Horn of Africa, on through Iraq and Afghanistan, then to Southeast Asia. Our legions also shore up the security of Taiwan and South Korea, and must always be ready for other contingencies that may arise abruptly at any time or place.

In particular, our military prepares for the possibility that force may have to be used against any country that tries to build nuclear weapons -- handy for threatening neighbors or sending along to terrorists.

Our vigilance is very costly. The tab for our intervention in Iraq has already hit \$300 billion, and rises about an additional \$1 billion each week. Our overall military spending exceeds \$1.25 billion per day. And it's likely that costs will continue to soar. Even an aggressive base closure policy at home will result in only minuscule savings as a percentage of the total budget.

In the meantime, what Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld calls our "forward leaning" strategic policy -- putting constant, increasing pressure on America's adversaries -- appears to be driving others into more stubborn opposition to us.

Neither North Korea nor Iran seems to have been "scared straight." Indeed, each probably sees acquisition of a small nuclear arsenal as the only way to withstand America's coercive diplomacy, now and in the future.

With 17 brigades tied down in Iraq, on top of our other commitments, we are in a sea of troubles. If war erupted on the Korean

peninsula as a result of the nuclear brinkmanship crisis, it would be very hard for the U.S. military to send reinforcements anytime soon. Senior Pentagon officials confirmed this recently, in their own elliptical Newspeak, noting that if another war broke out now we could only count on "winning less quickly."

Take matters a few steps further: Add a military crisis with China over the fate of Taiwan. Or factor in the return of Russia as an enemy, perhaps in opposition to the expansion of American influence among the former Soviet republics that lie in an arc around mother Russia from Eastern Europe to central Asia.

We are completely over-stretched right now just trying to cope with minor powers. If the major players ever get back into the "great game," we shall quickly see that our global pre-eminence was a will-o'-the-wisp.

What is to be done?

President Bush has opted, like a good Texan, to keep moving forward. In his second inaugural address, he articulated what amounts to a kinder, gentler version of regime change: spreading democracy all over the globe. And by keeping Rumsfeld at Defense he signaled his support for the true transformation of the U.S. military into a nimbler force capable of dealing with all contingencies in much more focused ways.

But it is hard to be consistent about which countries must become democratic, as many of our key economic and military allies are authoritarians whom we nevertheless want to keep in power. Especially in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. As to the other dictators among the world's 103 countries that are either not free or only partially free, we can count on Bush's policy to make new enemies of many of them.

With regard to transforming the military, we are now in the fourth year after Sept. 11 and our armed services still look much as they did before the terror war began. How different this is from four years after Pearl Harbor in 1941. By the end of World War II in 1945, our military had been completely transformed and had vanquished all enemies.

The major difference now is that the U.S. military is the world's largest bureaucracy, and has proven highly resistant to change. So as we create more enemies, the military is unlikely to save us. Pentagon leadership has both the political clout and the sheer inertia to remain in stasis for years to come.

We'd better come up with some other strategic options. In doing so, it may prove useful to recall how Rome, the greatest power of the past, coped with major threats.

Our own situation looks much like Rome's when the Empire was at its zenith in the second century. Rome then had no major enemies, but was beset by constant threats and warfare on the edges of its vast imperium.

At the political level, Rome sought not to alienate but to attract. It cultivated allies to share burdens, negotiated with enemies, and embraced their cultures. The 18th century historian Edward Gibbon slyly noted the Romans' intellectual suppleness in assessing all religions to be "equally true, equally false, equally useful."

Militarily, Rome's strategy was to cap the empire's commitments. With an ocean to the west, trackless deserts on the south and wide mountain ranges on the east, only the north was wide open. But instead of trying to keep on conquering in that direction, the Romans simply walled off Scotland, then drew lines at the Danube and Rhine rivers and secured the banks with forts and patrol flotillas. The system worked for centuries.

When Rome finally fell in 476, it was due to the failure to transform the legions from infantry to mounted forces capable of countering the nomadic horse archers who eventually brought down the Western Empire.

In the eastern half, though, the Byzantines did rebuild their military with heavy cavalry, and Constantinople outlived Rome by a thousand years. Not a bad payoff.

Can we now do as the Romans did? Of course we can, but we'll have to start by behaving as pragmatically as the Romans did. If we muffled our rhetoric about spreading democracy, the world would breathe a huge sigh of relief. If we focused on diplomacy and deterrence in dealing with Iran and North Korea, we could avoid war with them. Our willingness to withdraw from Iraq would be a

powerful signal to the Muslim world that we do not seek a clash of civilizations.

There's no way to avoid all military commitments. The demilitarized zone between the two Koreas is the modern counterpart to Hadrian's Wall. Our navy must secure the Taiwan Strait and other critical sea passages, much as Roman flotillas once patrolled the Rhine, the Danube and the Mediterranean Sea. Even our continuing hunt for terrorists carries echoes of the occasional Roman forays outside the empire to root out bandit havens.

These are all clear-cut tasks that can be undertaken at reasonable cost. If we limit ourselves to them, rather than try to manage an essentially ungovernable world, we may be able to enjoy a Pax Americana even longer than ancient Rome's peace. If we keep pushing aggressively forward, however, we are bound to fail at ruinous cost. The choice is ours.

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